

Chaos magic

Chaos magic, also spelled **chaos magick**,^{[1][2]} is a contemporary magical practice. It was initially developed in England in the 1970s, drawing heavily from the philosophy of artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare.^[3] Sometimes referred to as "success magic" or "results-based magic", chaos magic claims to emphasize the attainment of specific results over the symbolic, ritualistic, theological or otherwise ornamental aspects of other occult traditions.^[4]

Chaos magic has been described as a union of traditional occult techniques and applied postmodernism^[5] – particularly a postmodernist skepticism concerning the existence or knowability of objective truth.^[6] Chaos magicians subsequently treat belief as a tool, often creating their own idiosyncratic magical systems and frequently borrowing from other magical traditions, religious movements, popular culture and various strands of philosophy.^[5]

Early leading figures include Peter J. Carroll and Ray Sherwin.^[4]

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Concept and terminology

Chaos magic rejects the existence of absolute truth, and views all occult systems as arbitrary symbol-systems that are only effective because of the *belief* of the practitioner.^{[6][7]} Chaos magic thus takes an explicitly agnostic position on whether or not magic exists as a supernatural force, with many chaos magicians expressing their acceptance of a psychological model as one possible explanation.^{[7][8]}

The word *chaos* was first used in connection with magic by Peter J. Carroll in *Liber Null* (1978), where it is described as "the 'thing' responsible for the origin and continued action of events."^[7] Carroll goes on to say that "It could as well be called 'God' or 'Tao', but the name 'Chaos' is virtually meaningless and free from the anthropomorphic ideas of religion."^[7]

Beliefs and general principles

Results-based magic

Magical traditions like Wicca, Qabalah or the Golden Dawn system combine techniques for bringing about change with "beliefs, attitudes, a conceptual model of the universe (if not several), a moral ethic, and a few other things besides."^[9] Chaos magic grew out of the desire to strip away all of these extraneous elements, leaving behind only the techniques for effecting change; hence the emphasis is on actually *doing* things – i.e., experimenting with different techniques, rather than memorizing complex rules, symbols and correspondences – and then retaining those techniques that appear to produce results.^[9]

This "pick'n'mix/D.I.Y" approach means that the working practices of different chaos magicians often look drastically different, with many authors explicitly encouraging readers to invent their own magical style.^{[8][10][11]}

Belief as a tool

The central defining tenet of chaos magic is arguably the "meta-belief" that "belief is a tool for achieving effects".^[12] In chaos magic, complex symbol systems like Qabalah, the Enochian system, astrology or the I Ching are treated as maps or "symbolic and linguistic constructs" that can be manipulated to achieve certain ends but that have no absolute or objective truth value in themselves^[9] – a position referred to by religious scholar Hugh Urban as a "rejection of all fixed models of reality",^[6] and often summarised with the phrase "nothing is true, everything is permitted".^{[13][12]}

Some commentators have traced this position to the influence of postmodernism on contemporary occultism.^{[6][13]} Another influence comes from the magical system of Austin Osman Spare, who believed that belief itself was a form of "psychic energy" that became locked up in rigid belief structures, and that could be released by breaking down those structures. This "free belief" could then be directed towards new aims.^[14]

Other writers^[15] have highlighted the influence of occultist Aleister Crowley, who wrote of the occult:

In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth and the Paths; of Spirits and Conjurations; of Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which may or may not exist. It is immaterial whether these exist or not. By doing certain things certain results will follow; students are most earnestly warned against attributing objective reality or philosophic validity to any of them.^[16]

Kia and Chaos

Within the magical system of Austin Osman Spare, magic was thought to operate by using symbols to communicate *desire* to something Spare termed "Kia" (a sort of universal mind, of which individual human consciousnesses are aspects) via the "passage" of the unconscious – hence the need for complex systems of symbolism. Provided there was enough "free belief" to feed them, these desires would then grow, unconsciously, into "obsessions", which would culminate in magical results occurring in reality.^{[14][17]}

Peter J. Carroll inherited this model from Spare, but used the term "Kia" to refer to the consciousness of the individual: "the elusive 'I' which confers self-awareness".^[7] The more general universal force, of which Kia is an aspect, Carroll termed "Chaos". In his own words:

Chaos... is the force which has caused life to evolve itself out of dust, and is currently most concentratedly manifest in the human life force, or Kia, where it is the source of consciousness... To the extent that the Kia can become one with Chaos it can extend its will and perception into the universe to accomplish magic.^[7]

Later chaos magicians have stressed that this basic operating process can be explained in multiple ways, from within different paradigms. For example:

- Within a spirit model, the job of a shaman is to communicate their intentions to their spirit helpers, who then work magic on their behalf.
- Within an energy model, a magician might direct their own qi/ch'i towards specific aims.
- Within a psychological model, a magician uses symbols to condition their unconscious to work towards their goals.
- Within an information model, a magician transmits information to an underlying matrix or field in order to produce specific effects.^{[9][18]}

Practices

Since chaos magic is built around an experimental, D.I.Y. approach that involves stripping all magical techniques down to their barest essence, any practice from any magical tradition can be incorporated under the banner of chaos magic: from Satanic ritual, to Wiccan sabbats, to energy healing, to Tantric practices, etc. However, there are a few techniques that have been specifically developed by chaos magicians, and are unique to the tradition.

Gnostic state

Most chaos magic techniques involve something called the gnostic state, or gnosis. This is described as an altered state of consciousness in which a person's mind is focused on only one point, thought, or goal and all other thoughts are thrust out.^[8] The gnostic state is used to bypass the "filter" of the conscious mind – something thought to be necessary for working most forms of magic.^[7]

Since it is claimed to take many years of training to master this sort of meditative ability, chaos magicians employ a variety of other ways to attain a "brief 'no-mind' state" in which to work magic.^[15] Three main types of gnosis are described:^[19]

- **Inhibitory gnosis** is a form of deep meditation into a trance state of mind. This type of gnosis uses slow and regular breathing techniques, absent thought processes, progressive muscle relaxation, self-induction and self-hypnosis techniques. Means employed may also include fasting, sleeplessness, sensory deprivation and hypnotic or trance-inducing drugs.

- **Ecstatic gnosis** describes a mindlessness reached through intense arousal. It is aimed to be reached through sexual excitation, intense emotions, flagellation, dance, drumming, chanting, sensory overload, hyperventilation and the use of disinhibitory or hallucinogenic drugs.
- **Indifferent vacuity** was described by Phil Hine and Jan Fries as a third method. Here the intended spell is cast parenthetically, so it does not raise much thought to suppress – "doodling sigils while listening to a talk which is boring, but you have to take notes on", for example.^{[20][8]}

Sigils

A sigil is a picture or glyph that represents a particular desire or intention. They are most commonly created by writing out the intention, then condensing the letters of the statement down to form a sort of monogram. The chaos magician then uses the gnostic state to "launch" or "charge" the sigil – essentially bypassing the conscious mind to implant the desire in the unconscious.^{[21][15]} To quote Ray Sherwin:



A shoal of sigils

The magician acknowledges a desire, he lists the appropriate symbols and arranges them into an easily visualised glyph. Using any of the gnostic techniques he reifies the sigil and then, by force of will, hurls it into his subconscious from where the sigil can begin to work unencumbered by desire.^[21]

After charging the sigil, it is considered necessary to repress all memory of it: there should be "a deliberate striving to forget it", in Spare's words.^[14]

In the Medieval era, a *sigil* was a symbol associated with a particular angel or demon, which could be used to ritually summon the relevant being.^[22] Spare turned this practice on its head, arguing that such supernatural beings were simply complexes in the unconscious, and could be actively created through the process of sigilisation.^{[14][17]} In modern chaos magic, when a complex of thoughts, desires and intentions gains such a level of sophistication that it appears to operate autonomously from the magician's consciousness, as if it were an independent being, then such a complex is referred to as a servitor.^{[8][23]} When such a being becomes large enough that it exists independently of any one individual, as a form of "group mind", then it is referred to as an egregore.^{[24][25]}

Later chaos magicians have expanded on the basic sigilisation technique. Grant Morrison coined the term *hypersigil* to refer to an extended work of art with magical meaning and willpower, created using adapted processes of sigilization. Their comic book series *The Invisibles* was intended as such a hypersigil.^[15] Morrison has also argued that modern corporate logos like "the McDonald's Golden Arches, the Nike swoosh and the Virgin autograph" are a form of viral sigil:

Corporate sigils are super-breeders. They attack unbranded imaginative space. They invade Red Square, they infest the cranky streets of Tibet, they etch themselves into hairstyles. They breed across clothing, turning people into advertising hoardings... The logo or brand, like any sigil, is a condensation, a compressed, symbolic summoning up of the world of desire which the corporation intends to represent... Walt Disney died long ago but his sigil, that familiar, cartoonish signature, persists, carrying its own vast weight of meanings, associations, nostalgia and significance.^[15]

Gordon White developed the technique of *shoaling*, which involves launching a group of sigils for a set of related aims. For example, instead of sigilising for "money", sigilising for a pay rise, new business clients, a promotion, influential new contacts, budget reallocation for your department, etc. – all of which help "shift the probability" towards the overall aim.^{[26][27]} White also developed the technique of the *robofish*, which consists of including a sigil for something that the chaos magician knows will definitely happen, to "lead" the rest of the shoal.^[28]

Cut-up technique

The cut-up technique is an aleatory literary technique in which a written text is cut up and rearranged, often at random, to create a new text. The technique can also be applied to other media: film, photography, audio recordings, etc. It was pioneered by Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs.^[29]

Burroughs – who practiced chaos magic, and was inducted into the chaos magic organisation The Illuminates of Thanateros in the early 1990s^{[30][31]} – was adamant that the technique had a magical function, stating "the cut ups are not for artistic purposes".^[32] Burroughs used his cut-ups for "political warfare, scientific research, personal therapy, magical divination, and conjuration"^[32] – the essential idea being that the cut-ups allowed the user to "break down the barriers that surround consciousness".^[33] Burroughs stated:

I would say that my most interesting experience with the earlier techniques was the realization that when you make cut-ups you do not get simply random juxtapositions of words, that they do mean something, and often that these meanings refer to some future event. I've made many cut-ups and then later recognized that the cut-up referred to something that I read later in a newspaper or a book, or something that happened... Perhaps events are pre-written and pre-recorded and when you cut word lines the future leaks out.^[33]

David Bowie compared the randomness of the cut-up technique to the randomness inherent in traditional divinatory systems, like the I Ching or Tarot.^[34]

Other chaos magicians have elaborated on the basic technique. Genesis P-Orridge, who studied under Burroughs, described it as a way to "identify and short circuit control, life being a stream of cut-ups on every level. They are a means to describe and reveal reality and the multi-faceted individual in which/from which reality is generated."^[35] Dave Lee suggested various magical ways to use the cut-up technique, such as cutting together two people to form a love spell.^[36]

Synchromysticism

Synchromysticism, a portmanteau of synchronicity and mysticism, is "the art of realising meaningful coincidences in the seemingly mundane with mystical or esoteric significance".^[37] It has also been described as "a form of postmodern animism" that "combines Jung's notion of meaningful coincidences with the quest for the divine, or self-actualization through experience of the divine."^[38]

From the beginning, the founders of chaos magic were clear that the "results" to be attained through their techniques consisted of synchronicities, with Carroll stating in *Liber Null & Psynaut*:

All magical paradigms partake of some form of action at a distance, be it distance in space or time or both... In magic this is called synchronicity. A mental event, perception, or an act of will occurs at the same time (synchronously) as an event in the material world... Of course, this can always be excused as coincidence, but most magicians would be quite content with being able to arrange coincidences.^[7]

Essentially, chaos magic consists of a set of techniques for *deliberately engineering synchronicities*.^[7] As Carroll makes clear in later texts, magical "results" consist of "meaningful coincidences" or "a series of events going somewhat improbably in the desired direction."^[39] Later chaos magicians have made the link between chaos magic and synchromysticism more overt.

Elsewhere, White speculates that this may be "the secret of kabbalistic apotheosis" – "hearing the language behind the words, connecting the things that aren't connected... a mystical framework for exploring and *encouraging* synchronicity."^[40]

History

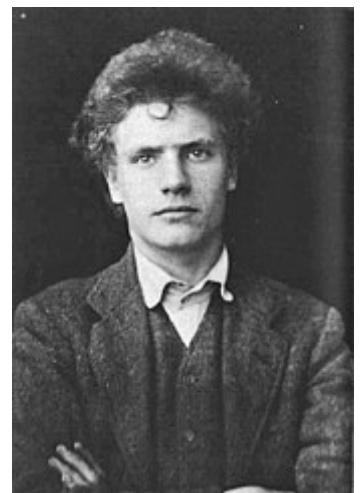
Origins and influences (1974–1982)

Chaos magic was first developed in England in the mid-1970s, at a time when British occultism was dominated by Wicca and Thelema.^[11] Although both of these traditions incorporate magical elements, they are both religions, and as such contain devotional elements, liturgy and dogma. Chaos magic grew out of the desire of some occultists to strip away these extrinsic details and distill magic down to a set of tried-and-tested techniques for causing effects to occur in reality.^{[11][9]} An oft quoted line from Peter Carroll is "Magic will not free itself from occultism until we have strangled the last astrologer with the guts of the last spiritual master."^[41]

Peter J. Carroll and Ray Sherwin are considered to be the founders of chaos magic, although Phil Hine points out that there were others "lurking in the background, such as the *Stoke Newington Sorcerors*"^[9] – a group which included Charles Brewster (Fratres Choronzon).^[42] Carroll was a regular contributor to *The New Equinox*, a magazine edited by Sherwin, and thus the two became acquainted.^{[9][11]}

1978 was perhaps the seminal year in the origin of chaos magic, seeing the publication of both *Liber Null* by Carroll and *The Book of Results* by Sherwin – the first published books on chaos magic – and the establishment of The Illuminates of Thanateros (IOT), the first chaos magic organization.^[42]

Austin Osman Spare is largely the source of chaos magical theory and practice.^{[7][21][9][11]} Specifically, Spare developed the use of sigils and the use of gnosis to empower these. Most basic sigil work recapitulates Spare's technique, including the construction of a phrase detailing the magical intent, the elimination of duplicate letters, and the artistic recombination of the remaining letters to form the sigil. Although Spare died before chaos magic emerged, many consider him to be the grandfather of chaos magic because of his repudiation of traditional magical systems in favor of a technique based on gnosis.



Austin Osman Spare, whose ideas formed the basis of chaos magic. Photo taken 1904.

Aleister Crowley was a marginal yet early and ongoing influence, particularly for his syncretic approach to magic, and his emphasis on experimentation and deconditioning.^[9] Other early influences include Discordianism, the punk movement, postmodernism and the writings of Robert Anton Wilson.^[9] Lionel Snell was also publishing writing on Spare in the mid-1970s, and became drawn into the burgeoning chaotic movement. Snell's book SSOTBME (1974) also came to influence the early chaos magicians.^[11]

However, despite these influences, it's clear from their early writings that the first chaos magicians were attempting to recover a sort of universal shamanism by stripping away any accumulated cultural gloss. Carroll makes this clear in *Liber Null*:

When stripped of local symbolism and terminology, all systems show a remarkable uniformity of method. This is because all systems ultimately derive from the tradition of Shamanism. It is toward an elucidation of this tradition that the following chapters are devoted.^[7]

This is echoed in Snell's description of Spare as a "master shaman" who brought into the world a new form of "shamanistic sorcery".^[43]

Early development and spread (1982–1994)

New chaos magic groups emerged in the early 1980s – at first, located in Yorkshire, where both Sherwin and Carroll were living. The early scene was focused on a shop in Leeds called *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, owned by Chris Bray. Bray also published a magazine called *The Lamp of Thoth*, which published articles on chaos magic, and his *Sorcerer's Apprentice Press* re-released both *Liber Null* and *The Book of Results*, as well as issuing *Psychonaut* and *The Theatre of Magic*.^[9] *The Circle of Chaos*, which included Dave Lee, was formed in Yorkshire in 1982.^{[11][44]} The rituals of this group were published by Paula Pagani as *The Cardinal Rites of Chaos* in 1985.^[9]

Ralph Tegtmeier (Frater U.D.), who ran a bookshop in Germany and was already practicing his own brand of "ice magick", translated *Liber Null* into German.^[45] Tegtmeier was inducted into the IOT in the mid-1980s, and later established the German section of the order. He was excommunicated in 1990 over the "Ice Magic Wars".^{[42][45]} Lola Babalon established the first American IOT temple in 1988.^[45]

As chaos magic spread, people from outside Carroll and Sherwin's circle began publishing on the topic. Phil Hine, who practiced chaos magic alongside Tantra and Wicca, published a number of books on the subject that were particularly influential in spreading chaos magic techniques via the internet.^{[46][47]} Jaq D. Hawkins, from California, wrote an article on chaos magic for *Mezlim* magazine, coming into contact with Sherwin and other IOT members in the process. Hawkins later wrote the first chaos magic book intended for a general readership.^{[11][45]} In 1992, Jan Fries published *Visual Magick*, introducing his own blend of "freestyle shamanism", which has had influence on chaos magic.^[48]

In 1981, Genesis P-Orridge established Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth (TOPY), an art collective and magical order.^[35] P-Orridge had studied magic under William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin in the 1970s, and was also influenced by Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, as well as the psychedelic movement.^{[49][35]} TOPY practiced chaos magic alongside their other activities, and helped raise awareness of chaos magic in subcultures like the Acid House and Industrial music scenes.^[35] They were also partially responsible for introducing the techniques of Burroughs and Gysin to the chaos magic stream^[49] – but this influence also ran the other way, with Burroughs (who already practiced magic and was experimenting with Spare's sigil technique)^{[30][31][49]} being inducted into the IOT in the early 1990s.^[30]

Pop culture: (1994–2000s)

From the beginning, chaos magic has had a tendency to draw on the symbolism of pop culture in addition to that of traditional magical systems; the rationale being that all symbol systems are equally arbitrary, and thus equally valid – the belief invested in them being the thing that matters.^[15] The symbol of chaos, for example, was lifted from the fantasy novels of Michael Moorcock.^[50]

Preluded by Kenneth Grant – who had studied with both Crowley and Spare, and who had introduced elements of H.P. Lovecraft's fictional Cthulhu mythos into his own magical writings^[51] – there was a trend for chaos magicians to perform rituals invoking or otherwise dealing with entities from Lovecraft's work, such as the Great Old Ones. Hine, for example, published *The Pseudonomicon* (1994), a book of Lovecraftian rites.^[52]

In turn, by the mid-1990s, chaos magic itself was beginning to leak into pop culture. Many of the writers and artists who produced strips for British sci-fi comic *2000 AD* also practiced chaos magic – among them Pat Mills,^[53] and Tony Skinner.^[54]

Grant Morrison, who began practicing chaos magic at 19,^[55] wrote the series *Zenith* for *2000 AD*. *Zenith* frequently featured chaos magic themes, as well as a distinct Lovecraftian influence, and the Cthulhu mythos-inspired monsters of the story were copied straight from the illustrations of *Liber Null* – leading to the threat of a lawsuit from Peter Carroll.^[53]

From 1994 to 2000, Morrison wrote *The Invisibles* for DC Comics' Vertigo imprint, which has been described by Morrison as a "hypersigil": "a dynamic miniature model of the magician's universe, a hologram, microcosm or 'voodoo doll' which can be manipulated in real time to produce changes in the macrocosmic environment of 'real' life."^[15] Both *The Invisibles* and the activities of Morrison herself were responsible for bringing chaos magic to a much wider audience in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the writer outlining their views on chaos magic in the "Pop Magic!" chapter of *A Book of Lies* (2003)^[15] a Disinfo Convention talk,^[56] and the documentary *Grant Morrison: Talking with Gods*.^[57]

Morrison's particular take on chaos magic exemplified the irreverent, pop cultural elements of the tradition, with Morrison arguing that the deities of different religions (Hermes, Mercury, Thoth, Ganesh, etc.) are nothing more than different cultural "glosses" for more universal "big ideas"^[15] – and are therefore interchangeable: both with each other, and with other pop culture icons like The Flash, or Metron, or Madonna.^{[15][55]}

Post-chaos magic: 2010s

Over the course of the past decade, chaos magic has experienced a shift away from the pop cultural interpretation that typified the Lovecraft/Morrison era. Hine has spoken of his disillusionment with the idea that all magic "can be formulated in terms of 'techniques' and that the theoretical underpinnings or cultural-historical context" do not matter:

...something you'll sometimes see advocates of CM asserting is that singing rune charms and repeating Hindu mantras are essentially the same procedure – the focus being on the repetition of a word or phrase – in order to enter an altered state of consciousness. So mantras are something that gets chanted – and the chanting (i.e. the iteration) is what's important – not the content or the context. This, to me, is a kind of reductionism. It predicates a universal explanation – that the 'technique' of iterative speech is enacted in order to establish an altered state of consciousness in

the practitioner – and subordinates all instances which apparently look as though that's what's going on – to it. So for an advocate of CM, there would be little practical difference between, say, chanting a rune poem, repeating the Gayatri mantra, or singing a sea shanty.^[47]

Alan Chapman – whilst praising chaos magic for "breathing new life" into Western occultism, thereby saving it from "being lost behind a wall of overly complex symbolism and antiquated morality" – has also criticised chaos magic for its lack of "initiatory knowledge": i.e., "teachings that cannot be learned from books, but must be transmitted orally, or demonstrated", present in all traditional schools of magic.^[58]

See also

- Chaos (cosmogony)
- Playback (technique)
- Ramsey Dukes

Notes

1. Carroll (2008).
2. Humphries & Vayne (2005), p. 17.
3. Chryssides (2012), p. 78.
4. Drury (2011), p. 86.
5. Clarke (2004), pp. 105–106.
6. Urban (2006), pp. 240–243.
7. Carroll (1987), p. .
8. Hine (1998), p. .
9. Hine (2009a), p. .
10. Fries (1997), p. .
11. Hawkins (1996), p. .
12. Carroll (1992), p. .
13. Carr-Gomm & Heygate (2010), p. .
14. Spare (1913), p. .
15. Morrison (2003), p. .
16. Crowley (1980), p. .
17. Baker (2011), p. .
18. U.'.D.'. (1991).
19. Vitimus (2009), p. .
20. Fries (1992), p. .
21. Sherwin (1992), p. .
22. Weschcke & Slate (2011), p. .
23. Marik (1998).
24. Rysen (1999).
25. Emerson (1997).
26. White (2012b).
27. White (2010).
28. White (2012a).
29. Cran (2016), p. .

30. Stevens (2013).
31. Grant (2015).
32. Harris (2017), p. .
33. Burroughs (2012), p. .
34. Doggett (2011), p. .
35. P-Orridge (2010), p. .
36. Lee (1989).
37. Valis (2008).
38. Horsley (2009), p. .
39. Carroll (2010), p. .
40. White (2013).
41. Carroll (2008), p. .
42. IOT (2002), p. .
43. Snell (1987).
44. Vayne, Dee & Wyrd (2012).
45. Hawkins (2017), p. .
46. Gyrus (1997).
47. Blackwell (2010).
48. Fries (2000), p. .
49. P-Orridge (2003), p. .
50. Nozedar (2008), p. .
51. Levenda (2013), p. .
52. Hine (2009b), p. .
53. Clutterbuck (2017).
54. Molcher (2015), p. .
55. Babcock (2004).
56. Metzger (2002), p. .
57. Thill (2010).
58. Chapman (2008), p. .

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